

REGRET, WITH MATH

by Greg Stolze

Terry is planning his classes and the cosmos splits in two.

Terry is a short, portly guy attending a small liberal arts college in the American Midwest. He's average, handsome in a certain light, homely from an unflattering angle. He's a sophomore and hasn't had an opportunity to develop confident opinions about beer brands or a sophisticated understanding of wine. But in the course of making one simple decision, he divides everything there is.



This is a science fiction story, but it doesn't have aliens or ray guns or time travel. It's science fiction because it's based on an unproven possibility arising from observations of subatomic particles. The math and thinking are hard to understand, and anyhow they're

irrelevant. What matters is the conclusion. What matters is the idea that the universe splits with every decision.

You're reading this but there's a different universe (the theory says) where you decided the previous paragraph was weak and you were too bored to continue. You continue your life marginally different from that twin in an alternate cosmos, who resembles you so closely but is, perhaps, just a touch less patient. According to the theory, there are universes where your parents never met, where Hitler won the war, or where I love mushrooms instead of despising them.

This theory seems, from one perspective, stupid. The universe is what it is and the idea of it spontaneously doubling just because I had to decide between buying Crest toothpaste and

Colgate beggars credulity. But it's a popular theory because, from another perspective, all of us can feel how *right* it is. You feel it every time someone makes you mad and you can't think of a snappy comeback. Then, as you skulk away down the back stairs you come up with the perfect rejoinder. "Oh, I *should* have said..." you think, and it's almost as if you can see through a veil to that other world where you were just a little bit quicker on the uptake. Who among us has not, on a lonesome night, thought about lost lovers and wondered what might have been, or contemplated missed opportunities, acts of cowardice, or deeds of foolish overconfidence?

Parallel universe theory is just regret with math.



In one universe, Terry – for reference we'll call him Terry₁ – decides on a whim to sign up for "Introduction to Judo" and fulfill his Phys. Ed. requirement. He randomly stabs his finger at the

catalogue, privately feeling that required P.E. courses are an anachronism.

But in the parallel university, Terry₂ remembers that his friend Oliver is taking Social Dance, and signs up for that.

The semester progresses and Terry₂ thinks Social Dance is a bit of a drag, but at least he gets to foxtrot with Mary Del Rio, who's attractive. Two years later, Terry₂ waltzes a few times at a wedding reception where Terry₁ is limited to a clumsy double-clutch and a few extra trips to the bar.

Terry₁, on the other hand, surprises himself with an affinity for judo. It's a sport that favors the squat and broad. He develops a friendship with another student named Harper, because the two of them are the only ones in class who seem really interested. After the class ends, Terry₁ and Harper sign up at the instructor's local judo school, where Terry₁ branches out from the sport of judo into its core

fighting art, jujitsu. (Specifically, Daito-ryu aiki-jujitsu, if it matters.)



If this multiverse idea turns out to be correct, it seems like an awful shame. Somewhere there's a world where you not only made one particular right choice, but where you made all of them. There's a world where every guess on every test was right, where your basketball shots were all swishes, where you invented the ATM machine at age 22, made millions, and spent the rest of your life in idle luxury.

That's not the real issue though, because we can always fantasize about perfect worlds and know we won't attain them. What seems worse is our inability to see the close ones, the universes that popped into being because of murky and uncertain decisions, not obviously bad ones. For every clear regret, there are a thousand choices where you must shrug your shoulders and wonder. We all act on limited information, we all have

to guess and we only see one result. We can't compare, and contrast, and learn from all the paths not taken, all those nearby worlds separated by the width of intuition. Our blindness to parallels makes it amazing that we ever manage to learn anything.



Years pass for the Terries. The universes continue at their separate paces. There are differences, the main one being that Terry₁ continues to study the martial arts, jumping a bit from style to style as he moves around the country. He goes out to Seattle for a job (where he does a little Goju Ryu karate, gets married, then gets divorced). Eventually he moves back to the Midwest to forget his love woes. He ends up in St. Louis where he gets a new job, starts seeing a new woman, and starts studying jujitsu again (though this time it's Hakkoryu instead of Daito-ryu).

Terry₂ does not develop his dancing into a hobby and as a consequence is a little pudgier and

a little more likely to get winded hiking in the mountains with his fiancée. But he goes to Seattle for the same job as his parallel universe duplicate, meets the same woman, marries her a little sooner because he was more available in the evenings to rent a movie and cuddle on the couch, and gets divorced about six months later than Terry₁ due to the same availability issues. But all the availability in the universe isn't enough to overcome their fundamental differences.

(Although there's yet another universe where they do, and one past that where they stick together despite growing despair over the rotting corpse of a once-loving relationship.) Terry₂ doesn't get the same job Terry₁ does because he's in the market half a year later, so he winds up in Kansas City, where he dates around but never gets into a long-term relationship.

Both Terry₁ and Terry₂ have the same mid-life career crisis. Both address it by going back to grad

school in their thirties, and both get accepted to the University of Chicago. They move into parallel apartments, sign parallel leases, and the only difference is that while Terry₁ spends two or three nights a week studying Aikido and Shinkendo, Terry₂ signs up at a local gym and takes an extension course in Beginning Italian.



So far, the two Terris lives' are remarkably similar, and the similarities continue. Specifically, both of them are taking the El to an exhibit of Dale Chihuly's glass sculptures (which both of them came to admire after seeing a huge installation in Seattle) and, by utter coincidence, run into Imelda, who used to date their friend Oliver back in college. Imelda and Oliver are long broken up, but she remembers Terry from parties before that gym-class universe split. In the case of Terry₂ she's more immediately comfortable and friendly because they also took that Social Dance course together, so

they know one another that much better.

In both cases they exchange phone numbers, hang out a few times, and are uncertain whether they're just old college buddies or whether there's an erotic undercurrent. It is in this phase of indeterminacy that they decide to go see the Joffrey Ballet with Terry (both Terries) coming to Imelda's townhouse to pick her up.



It's easy to imagine the better outcomes if you'd just held your tongue when the judge bawled you out, or invested in Apple way back when, or dated the nice co-worker who went on to become CEO instead of the sleazy, attractive one who gave you your first dose of syphilis. It's easy to be curious about the better lives we chose not to lead.

On the other hand, for every good decision we made, there's an equal and opposite bad one. For every universe where you're a

millionaire, there's one where you're toothless and broke. For every universe where you acted courageously, there's one where you chickened out a thousand times worse. There are drunk and junkie versions of you, evil twins who would, if they could only see through the barrier, envy you the same way you'd grind your teeth over the you on the yacht with the umbrella drinks and hot gold-diggers.

We all make our blind choices and hope they're good ones, as if the parallel universes are on a continuum with a heaven at one side and a hell at the other. We think that if we could see them all we'd know if we're in the middle or doing well or sliding downward. We think we'd know if we really are wise.

But if parallel universe theory teaches us anything, it's that we're always in the middle of an infinite array, better and worse in every direction, smarter than endless editions of us and dumber than

endless others. Maybe knowing that, and that the world we live in is the only one we make, is wisdom.



Terry₁ is wearing a t-shirt from a rock band called This Bike Is A Pipe Bomb, which he'd learned about from a dojo buddy in Seattle. He runs his hand over his bristly crew cut and frowns as he hears voices from inside. He double checks the address, but it's correct – he dropped her off here once. A male voice inside is yelling. He goes to the door, rings the bell, then tries the knob. It is unlocked.

Terry₂ is wearing a royal blue polo shirt and runs his hand through his shoulder-length hair as he hears the raised voices. He also checks the address again and rings the bell, but he waits a little longer before trying the unlocked knob.

As both Terries come in, Imelda is crossing a cluttered living room, walking purposefully and with lips pressed tight. She kicks a pair of

men's underpants out of the way with more force than necessary and clomps right over a sleeping bag spread out on an air mattress. An ironing board with a mixture of men's and women's clothes is set up across from a switched-off TV and then a man comes around the corner yelling, "Don't you walk away from me, you bitch!"

Terry₁ and Terry₂ have both heard about Imelda's brother Gerald, but she had not mentioned to either what a jerk he was when drunk. In both universes, Gerald grabs his sister by the shoulders and spins her around. She cries out, more in annoyance than pain, and then he starts shaking her.

Shortly after that, both universes subdivide again.



Terry₁ steps forward and says, "Let her go!" in a sharp, demanding tone. Gerald shoves his sister aside and yells, "Who the hell are you?" Then he reaches

forward with his right hand and gives Terry₁ a push.

That's when Terry₁ becomes Terry_{1A} and Terry_{1B}.



Terry₂ says, "Hey man, cool it now," in what he hopes is a soothing tone. Gerald shoves his sister aside and scowls. "Who the hell are you, fatso?"

"I'm a friend of Imelda's. What's going on?"

"It's okay Terry," Imelda says in a tired and disgusted voice, but Gerald steps into Terry₂'s personal space and says, "None of your business is what's going on." Terry₂ puts his hands up in a gesture that is half placating, half defensive, and then Gerald grabs him by his polo shirt and shakes him too. "You wanna get involved, fat boy? That what you want?"

Terry₂ splits into Terry_{2A} and Terry_{2B}.



Later, Terry_{1A} tells his buddies at the dojo about the situation and says, "I gave the little punk a good chop on the snot locker and he folded like origami." He makes it sound simple, and even believes it is simple.

In fact, it isn't simple at all. Terry_{1A} takes a half step back with his left foot during the shove, then moves his right foot forward about six inches and his left up around eight. As he moves he raises his hands, right a little higher than left. He pauses a half second, and when his fist drops on Gerald's face it isn't hurried or tense, but it is solid and weighty and shatters the thin bone on the ridge of the nose. It isn't simple because he shifts position so the blow lands square, and because he times Gerald's reaction to get it inside the man's guard.

Gerald stumbles back because it hurts like hell, but what stops him is seeing Terry_{1A} looking at him, calm, silent, ready to do more.

That's when he backs down and shuffles away.



Terry_{2B}, on the other hand, pushes back at Gerald indecisively and is opening his mouth to say something else when Gerald connects with a wild uppercut. Terry_{2B}'s teeth slam together on the tip of his tongue, it bleeds like crazy and the pain is intense. He stumbles back against the ironing board and as his hands flail for balance they connect with the iron. He grabs it. It's unplugged.



Terry_{2A} grabs Gerald by the throat, and Gerald tries to knee him in the balls, and Terry_{2A} clamps his legs shut on the knee, and then they're both so off balance that they stumble. They step onto the shifting surface of the air mattress and that just makes things worse, tipping them into the ironing board, which clatters on top of them as they hit the mattress, popping it. They wrestle

inconclusively while Imelda screams "Stop it! Stop it!" They hear her voice dopplering away but are both so busy trying to hit, gouge and restrain each other that they ignore her, right up to the point that she returns with the pitcher of Britta-filtered water she keeps in the refrigerator and dumps it on both of them.

"Quit it, both of you!" she shrieks. Bruised, wet, disarrayed and bleeding slightly, they sullenly obey.



Terry_{1B} bends his knees and rolls his hips forward just a little, lowering his weight and not allowing himself to be pushed. Like Terry_{1A} he does this without planning it and, indeed, without conscious awareness. From his perspective it seems like Gerald is too drunk to stay balanced, and as Gerald wobbles he says, "I'm a friend of Imelda's and if you don't calm down there will be trouble."

“Maybe I want trouble,” Gerald sneers, but the look of Terry_{1B} convinces him that maybe he doesn’t, really. He raises a middle finger and wanders back towards the kitchen.



Terry_{2B} sees Gerald coming at him again and doesn’t really think about the thing in his hand, he just swings it as hard as he can. It’s a heavy iron and it hits Gerald just above his ear, hits with the pointed tip Imelda used to get inside pleats and plackets on her blouses and jackets. Gerald sags and Terry_{2B} hits him twice more, both times in the head, once with the iron’s edge and then with the base, hard enough to crack the plastic. All three blows are within a few inches of one another on Gerald’s skull, and the force of it kills him.



“I don’t know,” Terry_{1A} tells his brother Fred a few weeks later. “I mean, I’ve been doing this stuff for over ten years now, and this was

the first, like, *fight* I got in. And what the hell did I do? I punched him in the nose like an eighth grader. I know all these, y’know, chokes and arm-bars and wrist locks and throws and submission holds and *everything* and when the situation comes down it all flies out of my head and I just sock him.”

“He stopped, didn’t he?” Fred says.

“Yeah, but... I don’t know. Maybe you’re right. But maybe that’s not the point.”

“You going to see her again?”

“Nah. There’s issues.”



Terry_{2B} gets arrested for manslaughter. On the stand, he breaks down in tears. “I just wanted him to stop,” he says, then has to pause to suck snot back into his nose. “I had to make him stop, and... and I...” He never finishes the sentence.

Eventually the jury decides that there’s was reasonable doubt.

Terry_{2B} drops out of grad school and moves back to Seattle.



Terry_{1B} never tells his dojo buddies about the confrontation, because it seems like such an anticlimax. He stops seeing Imelda, by unspoken mutual agreement. They're both embarrassed – she, by her asshole brother, while Terry_{1B} feels that after years of training, of planning contingencies and fighting imaginary battles, he backed down when faced with the real thing.



“He’s such a jerk,” Imelda says to Terry_{2A}. “You’re sure you’re okay?”

“Just a few scratches.”

They’re at an all-night diner. They punted the ballet and Imelda bought Terry_{2A} a new shirt to replace the one Gerald bled on and tore.

“I’m totally kicking him out,” she says.

“I think that’s smart.”

“He’s really nice when he’s sober. You wouldn’t believe the difference, you really wouldn’t.”

“He doesn’t make a great first impression.”

She smiles. Terry_{2A} smiles back and tentatively says, “Look, if you don’t want to go back there tonight... I mean, it’s still, like, a volatile situation and... um, if you want you could come stay at my place.”

Imelda raises an eyebrow.

The universe splits in two.

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